

National Farm Workers Association
102 Albany Street P. O. Box 894
Delano, California

Phone: 8661
(Four digits only)

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for Chris H.

Harassment of Pickets in Grape Strike

An undisguised collusion between growers and police which has earned for the Delano area the nickname of "Mississippi West" has ~~been~~ been one of the most disturbing ~~factor~~ elements in the strike being waged against grape growers by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO and the independent National Farm Workers Association.

From the ~~start~~ beginning of the precedent-shattering strike in early September it has been evident that the main tool of the growers was to be a campaign of violence and intimidation, waged with the permission and often the abettment of local police agencies.

Most ~~startling~~ ^{startling} appalling in a long series of incidents was the mass by Kern Co. ~~including~~ ^{including} nine ministers, arrest/of 44 pickets, ~~with the National Farm Workers Association~~ on October 19th, for shouting "Huelga"--the Spanish word for "strike" to workers in a vineyard. Shouting is the ~~pickets~~ ^{only} way of informing workers deep in a field that a labor dispute exists, and this infringement of the constitutional guarantee of Freedom of speech obviously was designed to reduce the effectiveness of the strike.

Previously growers and police had resorted to ~~widely~~ varying types of ~~illegal~~ harassment, illustrated by the following incidents:

On September 20 a picket narrowly missed being run down and killed by a grower's pickup as he stood at the roadside holding up his strike sign to workers in a ~~vineyard~~ field. The Kern County District Attorney's ~~Department~~ ^{Office} promised an investigation, but a month later nothing had been done.

On September 22nd a picket was knocked down by a grower's car in the presence of over twenty-five witnesses. The Kern County District Attorney's Office has declined to accept a complaint, and still is "investigating" the incident.

Repeatedly growers have driven threateningly close to pickets with their cars and pickups, but police have declined to accept complaints regarding ~~about~~/this dangerous type of harassment. When two pickets attempted to file a complaint, a Sheriff's deputy explained to them that "we want to make as few arrests as possible on both sides," and implied that the Sheriff's Department would not arrest pickets' cars for "caravaning" if pickets would not press charges for the much more dangerous practice of being buzzed by growers.

~~On September 25~~ Repeatedly growers have driven sulphur spray rigs along the edge of vineyards, spraying pickets. Police present on the scene took action only once, when a spray rig driven down a public highway ~~sprayed~~ ~~administered~~ passed within six inches of a minister and sprayed him directly in the face. Tractors pulling discs on a Schenley Industries ranch drove back and forth within five feet of pickets for over two hours spraying them with a heavy cloud of dust while police did nothing.

On September 25 a picket was pushed and threatened for a period of over five minutes by grower Charles Dispoto in the presence of three witnesses. A sheriff's deputy promised to make a report of the incident but failed to do so. The plaintiff was given a run-around when he tried to file a complaint, and when he finally found out how to go about it, was turned down on the grounds that the complaint was "stale."

A few days later the same grower assaulted and severely beat AWOC organizer Hector Abeytia. Police present at the scene failed to act, and a complaint was accepted only after the State Attorney General's office was contacted several days later.

Grower George Dulcich was arrested on a battery charge for attempting to strangle ~~an~~ a Farm Workers Association picket, but was released on his own recognizance, whereas a Farm Workers Association vice president who accidentally drove into a private road was held overnight in jail for trespassing.

Réverénd David Havens was arrested for reading aloud in a normal speaking voice Jack London's "Definition of a Strikebreaker," another curtailment of freedom of speech.

at the scene

Police/refused to act when a picket was knocked to the ground twice by a grower. When the picket was knocked down a ~~thi~~id time they took the grower into "protective custody" but ~~fail~~ declined to arrest him, reporting to a newspaper reporter that the picket ~~had~~ "fell down."

Ministers and others have been stopped on various occasions and asked to identify themselves for no cause whatsoever.

Police have taken thousands of photographs of pickets in an apparent & sometimes successful attempt to discourage them from picketing.

Police have repeatedly parked inside the entrances to vineyards and ~~xxxx~~ labor camps between pickets and the workers with whom they were trying to communicate.

The foregoing ¹⁵~~are~~ but a handful of the many incidents which constitute a continuing and shocking campaign of harassment and intimidation which beset strikers in their campaign for economic and social justice in the Delano area.